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# Users and the Survival of the Shop Houses in the Historic City of Malacca

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## Abstract

Intent of this paper is to discuss the survival of the shop houses in the historic city of Malacca based on the research on the perceptions of the users, site observation and available documents. The findings of the research suggested that the shop houses were the most visited places. The users had both positive and negative perceptions on the shop houses in terms of comfort, circulation and other aspects that relate to shopping activities. The information can be used as a guide to ensure the continuous use of the shop houses as the setting for current and future activities

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*Keywords:* User; shop houses; perception; heritage

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## 1. Introduction

The survival of heritage buildings in the historic city of Malacca is vital to ensure the continuous inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The specialty of the area is the existence of many heritage buildings and living cultural heritage. The buildings found in the area include both the public and private buildings built during the colonisation of the European powers (1411-1957). Even though the private buildings, particularly the shop houses, dominate in terms of quantity, they are most vulnerable with

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regards to survival. This paper introduces the background of the research which includes the methods used to examine the users' perceptions on the heritage value of the shop houses, and the reasons behind their perceptions. This paper is part of the research and focused on the mobile users only. The findings are discussed with some implications on the survival of the shop houses. Some recommendations and suggestions on related subject conclude this paper.

## **2. Research background**

### *2.1. The issue*

Consciousness in regards to conservation heritage buildings is still a new phenomenon in Malaysia. The first public outcry was in 1983 in an attempt to save an old building that housed Malaysian Architects Association (P.A.M.). Despite some efforts by conservation enthusiasts, demolition and unsympathetic changes to the original buildings and historic urban fabric still continue. An example was a destruction of a vast area of shop houses within the conservation area of Kota Bahru, Kelantan in 2000. It is also common to find new buildings and new façades sandwiched in between the rows of the shop houses in historic centres in Malaysia. The historic centres that still retain its historical character are basically found only in Penang and Malacca. Yet, three of the shop houses within the core area of the historic city of Malacca were destroyed in 2002 and the court case lasted for years.

It was only about five years ago that Malaysia has its own heritage act, known as National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645). However, this Act covers all aspects and the effectiveness in saving heritage buildings is questionable. The demolition of the 77-year-old Bok House at the end of 2006 signalled that more historical buildings will be reduced to rubble if the Act is not amended.

From the exploratory survey, it is assumed that the practice of conservation of the shop houses in Malaysia is not effective. This situation may be caused by the way the shop houses are valued. It was argued by some theorists such as Jokilehto (2002), Fielden (1982) and Harvey (1972) that the survival of the old buildings depends very much on how they are valued. While the controllers that include the state government and the local authority as well as some professionals recognise the importance of the old buildings within the area, it is uncertain that the users feel likewise. The issue here is thus, how the users perceive the heritage value of the shop houses in the historic centres.

### *2.2. The case study area*

The area chosen for the case study is the conservation area listed as UNESCO World Heritage site and defined by the Historic Malacca City Council (MBMB) as the 'Core Zone'. The area covers part of the settlement quarters, commercial area and civic zone (Figure1). Historically, the area on the eastern side of the core zone was developed by the Portuguese (16<sup>th</sup> century) and was later modified by the Dutch (17<sup>th</sup> century). The settlement quarters on the western side was built by the Dutch to house the officers. It was during the British occupation that some of the settlement quarters were transformed to shop houses (Lim and Fernando, 2006).



was analysed, the in-depth interview was carried out. The intention was to probe or further clarify certain patterns or issues in the feedback from the respondents and to confirm some of the responses. For the in-depth interview 20 static users and 20 mobile users of the study area participated. The data collected was then converged through triangulation method due to its reliance on multiple sources of evidence. This method is used based on the assumption that biasness will be neutralised when used in conjunction with other data sources, investigators and methods (Jick, 1979; Creswell, 1994).

#### 4. Results and discussions

##### 4.1. Perceptions on the shop houses as components of the historic city of Malacca

As observed on the site and through literature review (MBMB, 2003), the components of the built structures in the historic city of Malacca include both private and public buildings. The major land use in the Historic city of Malacca is commercial (520 units, 36.54%) followed by residential (300 units, 20.63%). The components of public buildings (museum, religious and historical monument) add up to 36 units (2.47%).

The findings of the MBMB survey (2003) however, were not reflective in the choice of old buildings in the main survey (Fig. 2). In free recall exercises it was found that the majority (87.7%) of the mobile users chose the public buildings (determined by the usage), in particular the well-known buildings. This means that even though the percentage of the public buildings is very few in the area the majority of the mobile users preferred them rather than the private buildings.

The finding supports the arguments by Serageldin (2000) that there is a clear distinction between landmarks and non-monumental buildings. Even though the non-monumental buildings or private buildings provide the setting for monuments, there is an apparent lack of appreciation in the architectural heritage as a determinant of cultural identity in societies. Traditionally, only the monumental buildings were perceived as cultural symbol. The finding of the research indicates that this argument also applies to the perceptions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century users of the historic city of Malacca.

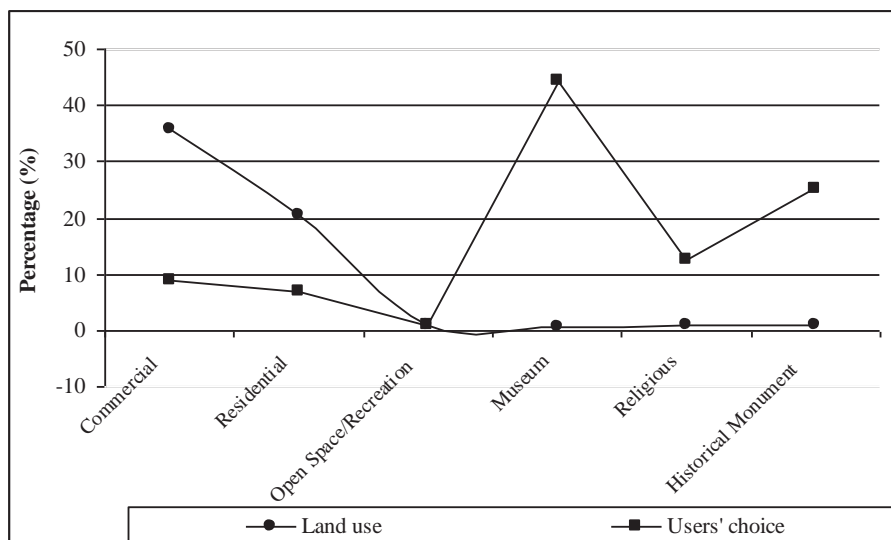


Fig. 2. Percentage of land use. Sources: MBMB, (2003) and Fieldwork, (2005)

The choice of old buildings among the users was in contrast to the most visited buildings in the historic city of Malacca (Table 1). More than half (55.15%) of the mobile users chose the shops either to shop (43.03%) or to eat (12.12%). Through observation it was found that the majority of the users in the western side of the study area actually went to the shops. Presumably, the bulk of mobile users are expected to visit the area as long as the shops within the area survive. Only a minority went to the other old buildings such as the temple and mosque within the study area.

Table 1. Most visited building. Source: Fieldwork, (2005)

BUILDING TYPES	BUILDING (NUMBER)	CHOSEN BUILDING CHOSEN (%)
Shop	71	43.03
Restaurant	20	12.12
Hotel	2	1.21
Bank	3	1.82
Mosque	8	4.85
Temple (Indian)	7	4.24
Temple (Chinese)	24	14.55
House/residence	2	1.21
Others	28	16.97
TOTAL	165	100.0

Indication of the findings is that even though the shop houses were most visited by the tourists and lived in by some of the static users, the building type was not perceived as important old buildings by majority of the users. This is in line with the statement by Heritage of Malaysia Trust (2004) that there is a lack of recognition for the shop houses.

The finding also implies that the bulk of the mobile users present in the historic centre were basically due to the presence of the shop houses as the setting for shopping activities. Thus the survival of the shop houses is vital in keeping the area alive.

#### *4.2. Perceptions on comfort in shopping in the interior of the shop houses*

Through observation, it was noted that shopping activities at the shop houses in the study area took place both indoor and outdoor. The outdoor areas were basically along the verandah-way which served as circulation area for the users and display area for merchandise.

It was noted earlier that the shops was the most visited building type in the historic city of Malacca. This relates to the outcome of the main survey whereby the majority (68.48%) of the mobile users perceived that the shop spaces were comfortable for shopping activities (Table 2). This finding was further confirmed in the in-depth interview whereby three quarter (75.0%) of the mobile users perceived the interior of the shop houses to be comfortable for shopping activities (Table 3).

The users related to several aspects that make the interior perceived to be comfortable for shopping activities and similar reasons were given in both fieldwork and in-depth interview. The most important one was the suitable arrangements of the merchandise (35.40% of users in fieldwork and 40% of users in in-depth interview). Through observation it was found that many of the shops actually sold small items,

particularly souvenirs. A neat arrangement of the merchandise helped to ensure the feeling of vastness in the shop houses even though the actual width was quite narrow.

Table 2. Shop spaces comfortable for shopping activities. Source: Fieldwork, (2005)

COMFORT IN SHOPPING ACTIVITIES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Yes	113	68.48
No	52	31.52
TOTAL	165	100.00

Table 3. Comfort in shopping in the interior. Source: In-depth interview, (2006)

COMFORT IN SHOPPING (INTERIOR)	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Yes	15	75.0
No	5	25.0
TOTAL	20	100.0

The other reasons included merchandise availability (23.89% of users in fieldwork and 20.0% of users in in-depth interview) and comfort in circulation due the layout of the shops (23.89% of users in fieldwork and 20.0% of users in in-depth interview). The comfort in circulation was mainly because the shop houses were attached to one another and arranged in rows and thus easily reached. It is a common feature in the old towns such as the historic city of Malacca that the shop houses are arranged in rows lining the street.

The indication of the result of the main survey was that about one third of the users (31.52%) perceived the shop spaces to be uncomfortable for shopping activities. This finding was confirmed by the outcome of the in-depth interview whereby one quarter (25.0%) of the users perceived the interior of the shop houses to be uncomfortable. The main reasons in perceiving the shop interior to be uncomfortable for shopping activities given by the users relate to the narrowness of the shops and the overcrowding of merchandise arrangement within the shops (38.46% of users in fieldwork and 60.0% of users in in-depth interview). Through observation, it was found that some of the shops, particularly in Jonker Street, were too crowded with merchandise as a result of trying to place as much items as possible within the shop space.

#### *4.3. Perceptions on shopping in the outdoor area of the shop houses*

The flow over of business to verandah-way is practiced since the old times. It should be noted that the shop houses in Malacca do not have five-footway (kaki lima) as normally found in front of the shop houses as in other major town in Malaysia. There is only a small verandah about 3 feet wide as part of the porch of the rowhouse before the conversion to become the shop house. Through observation, it is found that the direct linkage from one old shop house to the other through a five-footway, a character found in other shop houses elsewhere, is not evident in Malacca. Many of the verandah-way along Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Jonker Street are blocked.

The users of the study area perceived comfort in shopping to have some connections to the outdoor area of the shop houses. That included both the verandah-way and the adjacent streets. However, the majority of the respondents (65.0%) in the in-depth interview considered the verandah-way in front of the

shop houses to be uncomfortable and unsafe for shopping (Table 4). The main reason given was due to the heavy traffic in the area (53.85% of uncomfortable mobile users). The other reasons were the combination of both poor arrangement and over-crowding of merchandise that resulted in poor circulation along the verandah-way that continue to the interior of the shops.

Table 4. Comfort in shopping in the exterior. Source: In-depth interview, (2006)

COMFORT IN SHOPPING (EXTERIOR)	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Yes	7	35
No	13	65
TOTAL	20	100.0

The findings support the idea of pushing the car away from the main core of the historic city as in the case of historic cities, such as York and Bath in the United Kingdom. In those places cars do not seem to be an essential element in inviting shoppers to the area. Shoppers were drawn to the area even though there is restriction in both centres (Pickard, 2001).

## 5. Conclusion

A major contribution to historical value is the continuous use of a place the way it was designed and this is achieved through direct association with the heritage buildings. It was found that the mobile users were associated with the historic city of Malacca mainly due to the diverse choice of activities in the area and the shop houses were the most visited building. However, the findings of the research suggest that the shop houses lack in recognition. It was also found that the users had both positive and negative perceptions on the shop houses in terms of comfort, circulation and other aspects that relate to shopping activities. The shop houses were not fully perceived as comfortable spaces for shopping activities since one third of them perceived otherwise. It was found that the feeling of discomfort in shopping had some connections with heavy traffic, the narrowness of the interior made worst by the over-crowding of merchandise and crowded verandah-way. Even though some efforts were already done by the local authority to upgrade the area, it was considered not good enough by half of the users. These reasons may affect the cessation of the use of the shop houses and diminish its associational value. Thus, the shop houses and the adjacent areas need to be improved to ensure the continuous use and their survival. It has been frequently suggested by scholars that studies of environmental perception can act as an important information base to achieve quality environment. In this case the information can be used as a guide to ensure the continuous use of the shops houses as the setting for current and future activities and subsequently the retention of the area as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

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